

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE (Spinal meningitis, meningococemia, Neisseria meningitidis)

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection with *Neisseria meningitidis*. This is one of many organisms which can infect the blood and the meninges (the tissues covering the brain and spinal cord. Blood infections caused by this bacteria without meningitis are called meningococemia. Most cases occur during the winter and spring. Meningococcal disease is relatively rare.

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease. However, it is more common in infants, children, and young adults. It is more often found in places where there are crowded living conditions.

How does the disease spread?

Meningococcal disease spreads by contact with mucus or droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person. Many people carry the bacteria in their nose and throat without signs of illness, however, they may spread the disease to others.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of meningitis may appear suddenly, and often include fever, intense headache, stiff neck, nausea, and vomiting. Changes in behavior such as confusion, sleepiness, and being hard to wake up are important symptoms. In infants, the only signs of meningitis may be irritability, tiredness, and poor feeding. Babies with meningitis usually run a fever, but this is not a reliable sign. Meningococemia, the blood infection, usually involves a fever and a rash. Anyone who has the symptoms listed above should be seen by a doctor immediately. Meningococcal disease can be deadly if not treated quickly.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear two to ten days after infection, but usually within three to four days.

How long is an infected person able to spread the disease?

A person can spread the disease as long as the bacteria are present in the nose or throat. After treatment, the bacteria usually disappear within 24 hours.

Can a person get this disease again?

Probably not, though there are several types of *N. meningitidis* and infection with one type doesn't provide immunity to other types.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Antibiotics such as penicillin and ampicillin are used to treat meningococcal disease.

Should people who have been around a person infected with meningococcal disease be treated?

Household members, day-care center playmates, and close friends of infected persons, or anyone who has saliva contact through kissing, sharing eating utensils, or drinking from the same glass, need to ask their doctor about antibiotics. People who have had casual contact such as occurs in a classroom, office, or factory setting usually do not need treatment.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal disease?

Presently, there is a vaccine that will protect against two types of meningococcus. For more information, contact your local health department or the Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology or the Immunization Program.

What can be done to stop the spread of meningococcal disease?

Anyone with a cold or influenza-like symptoms should be careful to cover their mouths and noses with tissue when sneezing or coughing. During outbreaks in schools, day-cares, or in places such as barracks where there are crowded living conditions, pregnant women or people with chronic red blood cell disorders should ask their doctor for advice.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor
- Your local health department, listed in the telephone directory
- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology (801) 538-6191 or Immunization Program (801) 538-9450

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